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SUBJECT: PRISON CONDITIONS IN MONTENEGRO

¶1. SUMMARY: PolOff and PolAsst visited the Spuz Prison in Podgorica on March 24 and the Bijelo Polje Prison in northeastern Montenegro on March 31 to examine conditions in Montenegro's only two prisons. PolOff and PolAsst found that conditions are substandard in terms of overcrowding and somewhat dilapidated facilities, particularly for those prisoners awaiting trial. However, prison management is working to improve conditions and stated that a new prison would be built in the coastal town of Kotor to alleviate overcrowding at the prison in Podgorica. END SUMMARY.

Spuz Prison

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¶2. Prison director Bozidar Vuksanovic (who also supervises the Bijelo Polje Prison) told PolOff and PolAsst that in two years in his position, he and his team at Spuz Prison had constructed two new pavilions to house convicted inmates and renovated three existing pavilions, built a local well (saving nearly 300,000 Euro per year in water bills), and established re-socialization workshops which provide training in carpentry, metalworks, woodcarving, tailoring and other educational programs. He said his primary goals have been to improve overall prison accommodations and the quality of the re-socialization programs.

¶3. Vuksanovic admitted that prisoners awaiting trial (also known as "detainees"), who stay in a separate area, have experienced overcrowding and do not have the same access to prison facilities as convicted inmates. There are typically three detainees in one room. They eat in their cells as there is no separate dining area and must meet with their family members via a glass barrier. The maximum capacity for the detention area is 320 people; there are currently 390 prisoners in detention. Vuksanovic noted that the detention area is frequently overcrowded, especially in the summer, because cases languish in the legal system for an indeterminate amount of time.

¶4. PolOff and PolAsst toured the prison hospital, the new disciplinary unit and the new pavilions, which will open in

approximately two weeks. The prison hospital was equipped with a fully-appointed dental office, gynecological facilities, X-ray machine and physical therapy equipment. The assistant prison director stated that there is also a separate section where drug-addicted prisoners are treated and live, in order to separate them from the general population. The prison also has its own ambulance to facilitate transfer of prisoners to the local hospital.

¶15. The disciplinary unit housed eight large cells allowing for the solitary confinement of prisoners. Three of the cells were used as "suicide watch" cells and are equipped with constant video surveillance. Each cell also contained its own private bathroom. Prisoners in the disciplinary unit are committed to solitary confinement for a maximum of 45 days and are permitted two hours of exercise per day.

¶16. The two new pavilions will house 120 people each. One pavilion will be for minors, women and foreign nationals, and the second pavilion will be for prisoners with shorter sentences. Each cell houses four prisoners and has its own bathroom, and the pavilions have a dining area with a television, refrigerator and tables. Current facilities include a computer lab and library; prison authorities stated that language classes should begin shortly.

¶17. In addition to work opportunities in carpentry, metalworks, woodcarving and tailoring, for the last year, the prison has also cultivated its own greenhouse as well as the production of meat and eggs. The prison director noted that locally producing

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these items not only provided work for prisoners but has reduced overall food costs for the prison.

¶18. The prison director noted that nearly 2.5 tons of food per year was entering the prison via family visits. Along with the food came a number of prohibited items, including drugs. The prison established its own store where families and prisoners are permitted to purchase items. By allowing purchases at the on-site store only, the prison director noted that they have eliminated confiscated items in the prison.

Bijelo Polje Prison

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¶19. Bijelo Polje Prison is situated in northeastern Montenegro, approximately a three hour drive from Podgorica. The prison was built in the 1950s and currently houses 51 detainees and 64 convicts. While the prison does have space for up to 15 female prisoners, there are none at this time. The maximum capacity is 75 detainees and 75 convicted prisoners.

¶10. Eight rooms house 51 detainees in a total area of 250 square meters. There are two rooms available for female prisoners. The 64 convicted prisoners live in three small and three large rooms with a total area of 230 square meters.

¶11. The organization of the facility is very similar to the

prison in Podgorica. The prison has a small dining room, kitchen, and regularly planned activities such as gardening and other workshops. However, PolOff and PolAsst noted that facilities needed to be upgraded. Many rooms had peeling paint, old and poorly appointed bathrooms and the dining room was too small to seat all the convicted prisoners at one time. Prison management admitted that the building was due for renovation and stated that funds had been allocated for a new 1,500 square meter building to be built behind the existing one. The new building would hold 70 detainees and 70 convicted prisoners as well as 10 female prisoners.

Comment

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¶12. Montenegro's two prisons do not meet all international standards set out in the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners, particularly in regard to the number of people per room and work opportunities for detainees, as noted in post's 2007 Human Rights Report. However, PolOff and PolAsst were impressed by the prison director's initiative and resourcefulness, and by prison management's apparent dedication to improving conditions for all prisoners. This was also reflected in prison management's plans to build an additional prison facility in the coastal town of Kotor and the additional building in Bijelo Polje.

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